



TO BLOG OR NOT TO BLOG: DO BLOGS ALWAYS DRIVE BRANDS?

by
Sirimas (Benz) Amatayakul
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All opinions and observations expressed in this paper are the author's and do not necessarily represent MMC's position.

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Although many major brands have started to embrace blogs as one of their established communication channels, complementary to their existing mediums such as TV advertising, print advertising, and press releases, an astounding number of prominent brands, such as Starbucks, Pepsi, and Toyota, are voluntarily absent from the blogosphere. There has been an ongoing debate in the business world on whether creating brand blogs is necessarily a logical next step for all brands. This paper will focus on evaluating and summarizing the benefits of suitably managed brand blogs and the drawbacks of mismanaged brand blogs.

There are several benefits brands can gain from creating brand blogs. First and foremost, since a brand is a collective set of attributes in the minds of the customers, blogs can be used to establish or strengthen certain associations to drive brand equity. By posting issues, which are relevant to their respective industries, brands can be seen as thought leaders and can then enhance their credibility image. GM's FastLane blog (<http://fastlane.gmblogs.com>) is a vivid example of a blog which is constantly generating auto news and building a buzz among auto enthusiasts. Secondly, if done right, blogs can drive sales for brands. According to a Euro RSCG Magnet article (2005), bloggers' ability to connect with readers as humans, to speak to their concerns and their needs, to demonstrate that their best interests are truly at heart, and to empathize with them by actually being one of them creates trust. (NOTE: I took this out of quotes because it's similar but not exactly the same as what's in the article on the Website you referenced. I didn't have a copy of the original article; if this quote is in there, word for word, please let me know and we'll put the quotation marks back on.) Trust makes bloggers become highly influential figures in blog readers' purchasing decisions. Bloggers' comments on brands' new product launches or activities can stimulate market interest and drive sales. Additionally, blogs facilitate two-way conversations between brands and customers, allowing brands to get live feedback from customers and vice versa. Moreover, because blogs provide a highly interactive means for qualified networks of brand enthusiasts and customers to share ideas, they can be used to drive creative initiations for the brands and to test new product ideas. Interestingly, blogs can also be created on a temporary basis to generate buzz for marketing campaigns. Nick Denton of Gawker Media called this type of blog a "campaign blog." In 2004, Nike published a month-long, temporary blog to promote its Art of Speed project, in which it commissioned 15 talented young filmmakers to interpret the idea of speed and then get their ideas published on the blogs. The blog successfully created a buzz in the marketplace and positioned Nike as a socially committed company.

While the benefits brands could gain from joining the blogosphere are irrefutable, there are many arguments against creating brand blogs. One major issue regards confidentiality and legal concerns. Many executives are still not comfortable with letting their employees write and communicate brand-related issues to the outside world. More importantly, there are several illustrative cases where mismanaged blogs have greatly damaged brands. For instance, in 2005, Coca Cola was blamed and ridiculed for its effort in creating a blog to promote "Coke Zero" without mentioning Coke's involvement. The blog received negative feedback from the public

and Coke then reacted by making clear that Coke was behind the creation of the blog. Moreover, the Dr.Pepper/Seven Up brands were also very negatively affected by the “raging cow blog” controversy. In 2003, the brand developed a blog showcasing a series of posts about the life of raging cow, the fictional beverage mascot. It also gave away Raging Cow products to teenage bloggers and encouraged them to write about the products on their blogs. Many bloggers viewed this campaign as a corruption of the authenticity of blogs and organized a protest. The brands then needed to take the blog offline and have suffered bad publicity up until today.

In sum, the blogosphere is a tempting territory for forward-looking brands to enter. However, to ensure maximum benefits and avoid the aforementioned pitfalls, brands should set the following protocols for executing brand blogs. Most importantly, brands must keep in mind that authenticity and transparency are highly significant. Brand blogs should be written by real people on real issues in order to be as honest as possible. Brands also need to clearly and visibly identify that the blog is a corporate blog to avoid controversy. Apart from these two key precautionary protocols, brand blogs should also be positioned as unmatched resources, providing the latest unique information, which readers cannot find elsewhere. Brand blogs should also stay as relevant and updated as possible in order to constantly engage readers. Lastly, brands must ensure that other elements of the branding strategies are in line with and in support of the brand’s blogging efforts. At the end of the day, brand blogs would work most effectively when they are coupled with aligning strategies across all brand touch points.

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